In 2016, Dr. Dan Mathewson participated in a Teaching Interfaith Understanding faculty development seminar, run in partnership between the Council of Independent Colleges and Interfaith Youth Core, and generously funded by the Henry Luce Foundation. For information on future seminars, and to access more resources created by seminar alumni, visit https://www.ifyc.org/content/ifyc-cic-resources.

ABOUT THIS ASSIGNMENT

The following assignment was developed by Dr. Dan Mathewson for use in his “Religions of the World II: The Newer Traditions” course at Wofford College (Spartanburg, SC). In this course, students focus on the theological tenants and practices of newer religious traditions, such as Mormonism, The Baha’i Faith, and Jehovah’s Witnesses. This assignment outlines the site visit requirement for the course, and describes the paper that students need to write after attending a worship service.

ASSIGNMENT DESCRIPTION

General Instructions

For this assignment you are to attend at least one worship service in two of the three religious traditions we will examine this semester (Mormons, the Baha’i Faith, and Jehovah’s Witnesses). After you attend the two services, you are to write a short paper/report whose main purpose is to employ the “describe-explain-react” model to analyze a single moment or event from one of the two services you attended.

Specific Instructions: Worship Services

You may attend worship services with any Mormon, Baha’i, or Jehovah’s Witnesses community. You don’t have to attend services in Spartanburg, if you don’t want, though I have provided basic information about the worship services of the local communities. You’ll find the link to this information page on the previous Moodle page.

Specific Instructions: Paper

Length: 4-6 pages long, double-spaced
Assumed audience: ME! (Dan Mathewson.)

I did not attend the services with you, so you can’t assume I know what you saw or experienced. You need to explain things to me clearly - and you are more than welcome to use the first person.

Your Name: I don’t want to know whose paper I’m grading as I’m reading it, so don’t put your name at the top of your paper (or in a header or footer or in the file name you give your document). Here’s where to put your name: after the last sentence of your paper, start a new page and place your name there.

Paper Elements: The paper should include two elements:

1. General Overview. This is a very short overview (no more than a page) of the services you attended – just the very basics of where you went and what you saw and experienced. Your goal here should be to give your reader, me, enough description such that I can picture what you experienced. Because, for the D.E.R. exercise described below, you will only write about a single moment in one of the two services, you may, if you like provide a general overview only for the service in which your moment occurred, rather than for both services. If you opt to do this, however, you must communicate to me (either in the body of your paper or in a statement tacked onto the paper at the end) which other service you attended.

2. Describe-Explain-React. This part of the paper is far more important than the previous one, so devote most of your paper to it. For this part of the paper, you need to select one moment or event during either of the services you attended, and you are to analyze it employing the D.E.R. model that we discussed and workshopped in class. A refresher on the three parts of D.E.R. appears at the very bottom of this page.

The moment/event you select should be one where something transpired that you had trouble understanding or that elicited a strong reaction from you or made you feel uneasy or judged or perplexed. For example:

- Someone said something to you (or neglected to say something to you) that made you feel out of place;
- Something happened in the service that was puzzling to you or off-putting to you;
- Something about the way people were interacting with each other during your visit seemed odd or strange; or
- Some aspect of the service seemed radically different from your own prior experiences at, or assumptions about, religious services.

After you’ve selected your moment/event, you need to:

- Describe it fully (such that I will be able to “see” it in my head);
- Suggest at least two different plausible explanations for what you described (heavy emphasis on the word “different” – you can’t give me two explanations that have only slight differences from each other); and
Articulate what your own reaction is (or would be) to each of the explanations you suggested. To be clear, if you gave two explanations, you must supply a separate reaction to both of them -- even if you’re firmly convinced that one explanation is correct and the other one is not. If you gave three explanations, you must supply a separate reaction to all of them.

**Paper Format:** You may either:

- Compose this paper as an essay, where each of the above parts are integrated into a continuous narrative; OR:
- Write this more as a report, with sections (and section headings) devoted to each part; and subsections (and subsection headings) devoted to each of the D.E.R. parts; OR:
- Some sort of combination of the above two.

**Group Work:** Yes and No

You are permitted to work in groups to complete the following parts of this assignment:

- You may attend services together;
- You may discuss which aspects of the services you wish to highlight for the general overview;
- You may identify which moment/event you will focus on for your D.E.R. analysis.
- You may NOT discuss with your group your ideas about your description, explanations, and reactions of the moment/event you’ve selected. This part of the assignment must solely come from your own insights and observations.

**Describe-Explain-React Refresher**

- When you **describe** your “moment,” you are simply offering a value-free, judgment-free description of what happened. Just the facts.
- When you **explain** whatever it is you described, you are offering an interpretation of what transpired. Remember, the “moment” you described is one in which something happened that you don’t quite understand, that didn’t make obvious sense to you, or which was off-putting to you, or made you feel out of place (or whatever). Your explanation is your attempt to offer a theory of what was actually going on, what that moment was all about. Another way of saying this -- and maybe a better way of saying it -- is that you are attempting to explain what that moment meant for the people in that religious community. What, do you think, that moment meant to them? Remember, you need to come up with at least two different plausible explanations for your moment (with heavy emphasis on the word “different”).
- When you **react**, you are telling how you felt (or would feel) if an explanation is actually the correct one. Remember: because you are offering two different explanations for the same moment, you need to articulate two distinct reactions, one for each of the explanations (i.e., if explanation A is what was really going on, then my reaction would be X; if explanation B is what was really going on, then my reaction would be Y).